DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 377 CG 021 058

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TITLE Consequences of Retirement: An Essay.
PUB DATE Feb 88
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the California Association for Counseling and Development (San Francisco, CA, February 26-28, 1988).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Decision Making; *Leisure Time; *Older Adults; *Planning; Preretirement Education; *Retirement; *Time Management

ABSTRACT

Studies on retirement reporting that, compared to people not retired, recent retirees exhibited less income, more physical and mental illness, lower self-esteem, and less life satisfaction have been challenged and new findings have been revealed by longitudinal studies using data from large samples. It appears that perhaps the way individuals adapt and cope following retirement is largely predicted by how they adapted and coped before retirement. The main thing that does change for most people when they retire may well be the amount of discretionary time they have. As old opportunities and responsibilities of work are abandoned, new opportunities and responsibilities for decision making appear with retirement. Planning is needed for retirement, and systematic planning is especially needed for some of the business aspects of retirement, such as career changes and possible job searches, financial management, housing, health management, and legal arrangements. Aside from business matters, leisure planning and volunteer activities may also require systematic information and assessment. More and more retired persons are healthy and capable people; they must be allowed and encouraged to become more independent and productive. It is economically, socially, politically, and culturally imperative that older persons continue or resume making contributions to society. Retirement needs to be seen as a transition from one activity to another; and as a change in emphases rather than a withdrawal from useful, productive living. (A 69-item bibliography is included.) (NB)

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CONSEQUENCES OF RETIREMENT: An Essay

Gerald P. Bodily

Consequences of retirement have been the subject of many studies. Often these studies have emphasized problems following retirement. It's been indicated that--compared with people not retired--recent retirees exhibit substantially less income, more physical and mental illness, lower self-esteem, and less satisfaction with life. However, some of these conclusions have been challenged. It appears that many of the studies have been flawed.

Palmore and associates at Duke University published in 1985 a broad study using seven large databases from longitudinal studies; that is, these were studies that followed individual men and women, both white and black, to measure changes over a period of time. Each individual was measured both before and after retirement, on numerous variables. Some conclusions of Palmore and associates were:

1 Income--as expectable--dropped after retirement. The drop typically was 25-28%.

2 Standard of living dropped, but less than income.

3 Assets, such as home equity, shrank at a slower rate than income.

4 Health sometimes showed worsening, but not clearly as a result of retirement.

5 Attitude changes after retirement were mixed--sometimes showing improvement, and sometimes worsening. No general net reduction in satisfaction with life was demonstrated, despite minor gains and losses.

6 Consequences of retirement usually were influenced by a combination of factors, which tended to interact with each other.

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* Presented as part of a seminar, Rocking Chairs and Redirections, at the annual convention of California Association for Counseling and Development, February, 1988.

Palmore's findings are corroborated generally by another large and interesting study published in the same year; that is, 1985. Parnes and associates at Ohio State University studied a large sample of men (almost 5,000 of them), for changes occurring after retirement. This study, like that of Palmore, was longitudinal in design; that is, measurements were taken on each individual both before and after retirement.

Some findings from the Parnes study were:

1 A large majority of individuals said, after retirement, that they could "get by" financially. However, married and white individuals had more income than others. Nine-tenths of these retirees had Social Security or Railroad Retirement benefits; and half of the individuals had other pensions.

2 Return to paid employment or self-employment was more frequently found among professional and managerial individuals. However, this was also true among those from low-paying occupations.

3 Those returning to work after retirement generally failed to restore earning and responsibility levels to preretirement status. However, some of these individuals had been subject to mandatory retirement; and some others had retired for other compelling reasons.

4 Retirement was generally accompanied by increased time spent in leisure pursuits, as we would expect. However, changes were not frequently seen in the kinds of leisure pursued.

5 The most frequent social contacts were with the retirees' adult children. However, other relatives were often reported contacted; as were friends.

6 Psychological and physical well-being did not appear to suffer generally

as a result of retirement. Some individuals declined in well-being, but others seemed to thrive.

7 Adaptability to retirement conditions appeared to correspond largely to adaptability before retirement. Conclusion: "It may be that ... retirement as an event has little to do with well-being." Thus, said Parnes and associates, instead of studying the effects of retirement, we should study how individuals adapt.

How individuals adapt and cope following retirement is largely predicted, perhaps, by how they adapted and coped before retirement. This should hardly be surprising to counselors. Should the receipt of a gold watch alter a person's values and basic interests? Or his intelligence, or his aptitudes and proficiencies? And would temperamental tendencies, or physical capacities and physiological functioning change overnight--even if the individual is of so-called retirement age, and is assumed ready for pasture? Except as perceived by the retiree or someone else, how could an individual's life history, or his identity and self-worth be suddenly obliterated by the simple act of retirement?

The main thing that does change for most individuals the morning after the retirement ceremony may well be the amount of discretionary time available. For many individuals, there is a sudden unique opportunity to enjoy more personal freedom--and to utilize or squander it. Also, that freedom often embraces increased leeway for the individual himself to define what is good utilization, and what is squandering. In important respects, then, retirement typically brings new opportunities and responsibilities for decision-making, as--meantime--some old opportunities and responsibilities are abandoned or abated.

Weinstein has wisely advised as follows: "Know yourself. Know what you want from from your own retirement, and plan a course that will take you there."

"Plan." Yes, we need to plan a course to get us to our retirement objectives, just as we needed to plan our lives before retirement. Otherwise, we could squander our newly-found opportunities.

Systematic planning is especially needed for some of the business aspects of retirement. These include:

1 Career change and possible job search. Do you want continued earnings, and/or continued identification with the world of work, and/or camaraderie with co-workers?

2 Financial management will be needed for conservation of physical resources, and for prudent earnings on savings. Are you getting reasonable interest, with a high level of investment safety, and with maximum flexibility of deposits?

3 Housing may need to be reconsidered. Will you go to smaller quarters, or keep what you have? Will you stay in the area where you are, or will you seek a change of climate and surroundings?

4 Health management should be reviewed. Do you have suitable medical and hospitalization insurance? Are medical facilities suitably accessible? Have you planned for suitable exercise, and for good nutrition?

5 Legal arrangements need review. Should you write a will, or update an existing one? Is your property set-up for economical disposition at your death? And--what about arrangements for your final ritual, burial or cremation?

Each of the foregoing retirement-business subjects is likely to require alert and continued planning; and may require consultation with specialists, peers, family, and perhaps

government agencies. Financial planners, real estate brokers, attorneys, career and job-search consultants, and other specialists may need to be utilized. Even the selection of consultants needs to be carefully done; and care must be exercised to see that decisions are made in your own best interests, consistent with your personal goals.

Aside from business matters, other subjects may require systematic information and assessment. Leisure planning is one of these. Another concern may be volunteer work and community involvement. Should you give time and effort to worthy causes? Should you get involved in civic and political issues? Is your social life as active and rewarding as you want it? How about education? Do you need some retraining, or skills refreshment; and how about advancing your general education ?

Not all these issues and transitions need be encountered as one huge challenge upon retirement. Pre-retirement planning sessions are available with some employers, and in some schools. Anticipation and pre-planning can avert or ease problems. Birren observes that "research indicates ... it's not bad to grow old in the United States. It is bad (however) to be poor, to be lonely, and to be in poor health" in old age. Prevention of such conditions may require preplanning.

How we do retirement planning and retirement living are highly individual matters. Older persons are even more different from each other than are younger people. Ward reminds us that "chronological age is at best a very rough indicator of what an individual is like ... because it only partially reflects the biological, psychological, and sociological processes that truly define life stages" ... of the individual.

Retirement is, traditionally, something that happens in later life, for most of us. In past generations, the number of older people in the United States was small in comparison

with those in younger age groups. Today, however, there are 30-31 million Americans 65 or older. Perhaps more significant is the Census Bureau finding that the age group 85 and up is growing faster than any other.

The sheer numbers of healthy and capable people now in retirement is a fact requiring thoughtful attention. It seems inescapable that such retirees must be allowed and encouraged to become more independent and more productive. Many believe that human capability and potential are now being wasted on a huge scale among older persons. Older lives are impoverished while younger lives are overburdened to support the economic, social, and cultural costs of large-scale retirement. It is economically, socially, politically, and culturally imperative that able older persons continue or resume making the contributions to society of which they are capable. Quinn and Hughton have noted that "many potential contributions of older people remain untapped"; and that much can be done to promote independent, productive aging.

Tedrick carries this theme further. He says: "Imagine, if you will , a world where the aged play a dominant, central role." Specifically, he says that contributions of the aged must be publicized. Employment opportunities must be developed and encouraged. Social Security disincentives to earning must be removed. Elders as teachers must be emphasized. Living history--with elders recounting history--should be developed. Counseling by elders is feasible, he says. Volunteering must be facilitated. Tedrick suggests consideration of "emeritus" status for retired workers. And, says he, government must be more constructively responsive to the potential of its older citizens for enriching their own lives and the lives of others.

I have a dictionary that defines retirement as follows: "Withdrawal from work, business, etc. because of age." I believe that definition must soon be rewritten, to read:

"Withdrawal from specific pursuits, by choice or because of incapacity or necessity." The age reference needs to be omitted. More importantly, retirement needs to be seen as a transition from one activity to another; and as a change in emphases rather than a withdrawal from useful, productive living. For many people, retirement can and should be a gradual, long-lasting process; not a sudden retreat from active life.

Let's keep the rocking chairs. They're nice for resting. However, let's not permit them to impoverish us or our society!

Bibliographic Note: The author examined most but not all of the references listed under Bibliography, on pages 8-12 following. These references were developed jointly with Dr. Donald G. Hays and Mrs. Patsy B. Edwards, in preparation for a seminar entitled Rocking Chairs and Redirections.

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